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SUBJECT: CHINESE INTERNET REACTION TO IRANIAN ELECTION

Summary

1. The recent Iranian presidential elections and their aftermath were hot topics on major Chinese news portals, Internet forums and microblog platforms in China over the past week. Netizen commentary on traditionally liberal sites expressed support for students with some even comparing the situation in Iran to China. However, as with most topics, opinions on the events in Iran differed widely among Chinese netizens. A survey of major Chinese websites on June 17 revealed that netizens posting on mainstream or conservative sites tended to side with the Iranian government and criticize protesters. End Summary.

High Volume of Discussion

3. The Iranian presidential elections and their aftermath were hotly discussed topics on the Chinese Internet beginning on June 13. On Sina.com, a popular news portal that ranks stories based on viewer traffic, articles on Iran made up four of the ten most commented on international news articles on June 14. Throughout the week, topics related to North Korea and Iran were among the most discussed stories on Sina.com. Though harder to quantify, Chinese discussion of Iranian elections was also widespread on microblogging platforms. On the Chinese twitter clone Fanfou, for example, searches on June 17th revealed between 5 and 15 posts about the Iranian election per hour. Discussion of Iran on microblog platforms was increased when well known internet personalities including Ai Weiwei, Lian Yue and Michael Anti began publishing comments about Iran. These comments were then widely reposted by other users.

Unsympathetic Netizens

4. Netizen commentary published on many mainstream Internet sites was generally critical of Iranian protesters. On popular mainstream Internet news portal Sohu.com, netizens were critical of what they saw as a "color revolution" with western government involvement. Some popular comments included: "Mir Hussein Moussavi is America's inside man," "democracy is always easily manipulated by the west" and "America is the black hand behind the scenes." While many netizens posting on the more conservative People's Daily's Strong Country Forum and the militaristic Tiexue.net echoed the sentiments found on Sohu, those sites also served as a platform for deeper analysis of events in Iran. Analysis there mostly focused on whether Iran was experiencing a "color revolution." (Note: It is impossible to discount the influence of paid government netizens who are known to receive compensation for posting government approved messages on Chinese websites. These members of the so-called "50 Cent party" are paid a nominal fee per posting in order to give Internet readers the impression that certain government endorsed opinions are more widely held than they actually are.)

Liberal Sites More Sympathetic

15. Chinese postings on traditionally liberal websites such as microblogging platforms Fanfou and Twitter and forums such as Cat898 were more sympathetic to Iranian protesters. On these sites, netizens openly used the situation in Iran to comment on Chinese politics. Postings on Fanfou included "Iran is not a democratic country [but it is still] more democratic than China," "the Iranian government isn't permitting foreign journalists to interview rioters, in this area, Iran is 20 years behind China" and "is today's Iran China twenty years ago?" Another popular posting on Fanfou asked: "What if China erupted in protests? What role would Twitter, Fanfou, Kaixin001 (a social networking site) and Facebook play? What should be done if all these systems were "blocked" (weihule)?" The posting then links to a Chinese article describing the role of individuals outside Iran in assisting Iranian protesters access foreign information and get their messages to the outside world after networking sites were blocked in Iran.

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